

## Timber Rattlesnake Survey (Video transcript)

**David Garst:** If you look right out here about 10 meters away from us, you'll see a nice big yellow phase laying on top, perched up on a rock. And just below her is a dark phase rattlesnake. My name is David Garst, I'm a graduate student at Virginia Tech working on timber rattlesnakes. I'm being funded currently by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries under a State Wildlife Grant. This area, these exposed rocky areas like we're sitting in here are places where the gravid females come to gestate during the summertime. And what we're doing here, we're surveying these gravid females, kinda just checking for the presence of rattlesnakes in these areas.

*[Stick rattling against rocks]*

*[Rattlesnake rattling]*

Here's one right here. You can see where... come here, Ron.

One of the purposes of this project is to look at, look at these snakes on kind of a statewide scale, see where they are, where they're not, kind of look at some of the local land use problems over some of these areas and see what landscape-level things may be affecting these snakes. In Northern Virginia right now, I know of several populations that are being, being severely threatened by home development – subdivisions going in – they're just really, they're just putting them in around these little small kinda Blue Ridge outlier mountains and just choking these snakes out. Other places like Lee County, Scott County, coal mining, strip mining is just, you know, wiping out habitat.

All the venomous snakes in Virginia give live birth: the water moccasins, copperheads, and the timber rattlesnake. And when these neonates are born, there could be anywhere from maybe 2 to 14 or 15 per female, it averages somewhere around 7 or 8 usually. And they're about 11 inches long when they're born. Some of these females here may be greater than 20 years old.

*[Camera shutter clicking]*

What we're seeing here are gravid females. And there's at least one postpartum female in here somewhere, just based on the evidence of the few neonates we're seeing. And she probably has given birth within past 24 to 48 hours, I would say.

These snakes are primarily are feeding, probably, on white-footed mice and deer mice, just because it's the most abundant thing out there. I think they really like to get a hold of chipmunks and voles if they can, because they're a little bit bigger piece of food, but it's not like trying to eat a squirrel where they're so big that once the snake gets it down, it's going to be a real hindrance to the snake to actually have to find someplace to spend 4 or 5 week digesting it.

These snakes, they serve an ecosystem function. They are a predator in the eastern deciduous forests. They serve as a control for rodent populations and other things like that. And just as they are a predator, they serve as prey for some other species, like coyotes, great horned owls, barred owls, red tail hawks. They have their place in this system just as everything else.

I would just about one hundred percent disagree with people saying that snakes are mean and aggressive. To a snake, you are viewed as a predator, and the one thing these snakes want to do is get away from you. And by harassing the snake and poking at it, you're not letting that snake just go on or



just leaving it alone. And what you're doing is eliciting a defensive response from the snake. Snake's gonna get, gonna get all agitated and wind up and probably strike at you. But if you leave these snakes alone and just, you know, either just observe them from a distance or, if you don't like snakes, just go away from them. Just go around them, leave 'em alone, you'll never have problems with them.

We want to find out what's going on with these things before it gets too late, before we *need* to give them protective status. Because rattlesnakes as a whole are something that are truly American; they're not found in Southeast Asia, or Europe, or anywhere else, in Africa. It's something that we can claim as our own, and I think we need to give them some level of protection.

*[Rattlesnake rattles]*

